

From Burnham to Buin

Sowing the seeds of peace in the land of the snow-capped mountains

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In the second half of 1997, two rounds of talks held at the Burnham Military Camp near Christchurch, New Zealand, were to break the deadlock in the decade-long Bougainville conflict. The Burnham talks occurred after five failed peace accords and two failed ceasefire agreements. Joseph Kabui, then leader of the Bougainville Interim Government (BIG), described the outcome of these talks saying:

‘Contained in the *Burnham Declaration* is the most powerful of all democratic notions, that the people themselves will have the final say on the outcome of our work. Just as the discussions by our officials have brought us together here, our discussion together must get us back to Bougainville and back to a situation which places the decision back into the hands of the people.’

Pressure for peace

By 1997, attitudes towards the war were beginning to shift. The silent majority of Bougainvilleans were tired of war and longed to return to normal village life. Women’s groups, church groups and chiefs increased their pressure on both the BRA and the PNG-backed Bougainville Transitional Government to negotiate for peace.

The more moderate of the BRA and BIG leadership began to realise that the war was creating such divisions that even if they were to succeed in ‘winning’, they would inherit a hopelessly divided society. In part because of the awareness of this likely cost of victory, there was a change in the balance of power within the BRA and BIG leadership, resulting in reduced influence for the ‘hard-liners’ around Francis Ona and increased influence for a moderate leadership around Joseph Kabui. This was sufficient for the latter group to have confidence to act independently of Ona for the first time, which led to a shift in the BRA dialogue from war to peace.



The Sandline affair of March 1997 had a strong impact on the BRA and BIG and the PNG government. The rejection of Sandline by the PNGDF helped change the perceptions of ordinary Bougainvilleans and the BRA of the PNGDF. A conflict resolution workshop conducted in the first half of 1997 by Brisbane lawyers Mark Plunkett and Leo White, also encouraged 'hard-line' members of the BIG and BRA to re-think their positions. The two also trained pro-government leaders, including a representative from the PNGDF, in Buka.

On the PNG side there was an awareness that the situation had reached a military stalemate and the PNGDF had little capacity to defeat the BRA. Pressure mounted on the government to end the war.

The ousting of Sandline also raised the international profile of the Bougainville crisis. There was a new sense that the world was watching Bougainville. The Australian government realised that the conflict had the potential to destabilise the entire region and expressed its firm opposition to the use of mercenaries, thus improving relations with the Bougainville people. In the aftermath of Sandline both the Australian and the New Zealand governments became actively involved in peacemaking in a number of ways.

The road to Burnham

In March/April 1997 the leader of the New Zealand delegation to the UN Human Rights Commission in

Geneva, Rene Wilson, made contact with BIG leaders Martin Miriori and Jonathan Ngati who were also attending the Commission. Wilson had a prior relationship with Miriori as the two men had served together on the South Pacific Forum in the previous decade. The New Zealand Government had specifically instructed Wilson to consult with Miriori on the prospects of the resumption of peace negotiations and how New Zealand might assist in these efforts. Later in April, New Zealand Foreign Minister Don McKinnon contacted Miriori and conveyed New Zealand's proposal for renewed peace efforts in Bougainville. In May, New Zealand's High Commissioner in PNG during the 1990 'Endeavour talks', John Hayes, met with the BTG team visiting Moresby to discuss the Kangu Beach PNGDF prisoners.

While all these confidential discussions were going on, the BRA and BIG leadership held an emergency meeting and agreed to send a delegation to Solomon Islands under the leadership of Chairman Joseph Kabui and General Sam Kauona. The purpose of the mission was to start the process of internal peace talks between BRA/BIG and BTG/Resistance. But before this, they wished to consult with BIG leaders like Miriori, Mike Foster and Moses Havini who were abroad. This meeting took place on June 6 in Gizo, in Solomon Islands.

Back in Bougainville, Bougainville Regional MP, John Momis was kidnapped by BRA forces at Tinputz and taken prisoner. The Ona-Momis Resolution for lasting

peace on Bougainville led to Momis' release. Both leaders also committed themselves to confirm Bougainville's independence through a referendum.

On 18 June 1997, Miriori, Havini, Forster and Kapeatu Puarua of BTG in Buka held talks in Auckland with McKinnon and his senior Foreign Ministry officials including John Hayes. The groups also consulted with Francis Ona (by telephone) and Kabui and Kauona who were then in the Solomons.

The Bougainvilleans explained that earlier meetings had not succeeded because they had insufficient time to resolve internal difficulties. The New Zealand side was willing to listen and had no particular agenda except to support a process owned by Bougainvilleans. They were asked to host a meeting of all Bougainville factions so that they could come together and speak with one voice. It was agreed they would work towards establishing the Burnham Process.

Preparation for the Burnham talks saw the active involvement of John Hayes, former New Zealand High Commissioner to PNG, who helped to develop the initial trust between the BTG and BIG leaderships. High-risk missions were executed into BRA stronghold areas in central Bougainville with the purpose of offering New Zealand's willingness to facilitate dialogue between the warring Bougainville factions.

Burnham I

On July 5, the first round of Burnham talks began. They were attended by more than 70 Bougainville leaders representing different interest groups on the island, but without the direct involvement of the PNG government. There were delegates from the BRA and the BIG, the BTG and the Resistance force, women's groups, the Churches and local chiefs.

The delegations were welcomed in a Maori ceremony, involving a *hongi* or shaking hands, touching noses and exchanging the breath of life. People who had been 'enemies' for almost 10 years arrived in a neutral environment, participated in the ceremony and only afterwards realised they had connected.

In his opening speech, the then BTG Premier, Mr Gerard Sinato described New Zealand as the 'fertile ground to sow the seed of peace so that a tree of peace can find root and grow quickly.'

The talks were structured in such a way that there were 'all Bougainville' sessions which they called the 'taraoting', literally translated from the Melanesian Pidgin (Tok Pisin) as 'vomiting session'. This is when all the participants met together and held public debates. Before substantive discussions could begin, there were long speeches by each of the senior delegates or village elders in which

they outlined where they saw the process moving. Then there were the separate factions' sessions.

While New Zealand facilitated and observed the meeting, it was co-chaired by the Bougainvilleans themselves through BIG Secretary Martin Miriori and PNG Chief Ombudsman, a Bougainvillean Simon Pentanu. Participants themselves arranged meetings within the process. New Zealand supplied transport to a secure venue, accommodation and meals and occasionally set up interventions to let things cool down or create space for small groups to brainstorm around issues. The President of the BIG and supreme commander of the BRA, Francis Ona, did not attend the discussions.

In the words of BIG leader Miriori: 'The delegations firstly and foremost recognised the fact that the war had divided them. And without a commitment to each other and entering into a process of reconciliation and unity at all levels of the community; there could be possibly no hope of ever achieving peace with Papua New Guinea...'

The resultant *Burnham Declaration* of 18 July 1997 called for leaders to bring about a ceasefire and for an international peacekeeping force to be established in Bougainville. It also called for the ultimate withdrawal of the PNGDF and recognised the right of Bougainvilleans to determine their own political future.

As a gesture to the national government for allowing the Burnham meeting to happen, the BRA agreed to release the five PNGDF soldiers from captivity in south Bougainville. In response, the PNGDF allowed safe passage for those returning from Burnham and brought Prime Minister Skate into the process early in his term.

The success of Burnham I

There were many factors that led to the success of these talks, in contrast to previous failed negotiations. Firstly, the Burnham Military Camp near Christchurch provided an ideal environment for the participants. Tight security and the military atmosphere of the camp helped to reduce the fear and mistrust that had haunted Bougainvilleans over decades. This enabled people to speak freely about the pain and frustration of the war and the cathartic confrontations were important icebreaking. In Bougainville in 1997, this type of session would have led to more violence, but in Burnham, Bougainvilleans could take advantage of neutral ground.

The very fact of being away from home influenced Bougainville leaders in several ways. In alien surroundings, Bougainvilleans were thrown up against their common ethnic and national identity and forced to acknowledge the cost of the conflict. These realisations were aided by the broader experience of the participants. A visit to the Maori traditional Marai village and the wisdom of the Chiefs of the Maori Clans inspired the

Bougainvilleans with its insight into the Maori anti-colonial struggle. The New Zealand peace agreements such as the *Watangi Treaty* brought hope for unity and reconciliation among the Bougainvilleans.

The neutrality of the New Zealand government was another important factor in the success of the talks. They restricted their role to that of facilitating and left the Bougainvilleans to take responsibility for sorting out their differences, whilst still maintaining a level of friendship with the delegates. During informal time, Don McKinnon would often drop in unannounced to chat with delegates. Such gestures were crucial in boosting the morale of the Bougainvilleans.

After the July 1997 elections, a new and more moderate government replaced Prime Minister Chan. In this climate, negotiations became increasingly possible. But the clinching factor may have been the person of the new PNG Prime Minister, Bill Skate, whose personal friendship with BIG Secretary Martin Miriori facilitated talks. For the first time a Prime Minister of PNG showed total commitment to securing peace on the island.

In August, reversing a long-standing Australian government policy of no ministerial or official contact with the members of the BRA, Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer met with Moses Havini of the BIG in Sydney to discuss developments in the peace process and to convey the message that Australia was seeking to give constructive support in the search for a settlement. Downer then announced that Australia would provide, from within its existing aid programme to PNG, A\$100 million over five years for a rehabilitation programme on Bougainville, in addition to the A\$34 million already so allocated.

Burnham II

The formal participation of the PNG government was the next major step in the peace process. The second round of talks was held at the same venue from 1-10 October 1997.

Burnham II was similar in approach to the first meeting with support from the New Zealand government. It involved PNG officials and representatives from the Solomon Islands as well as a large group of the BRA at a unit level. The outcome of Burnham II, *The Burnham Truce*, was signed by representatives of the PNG government, the BTG, BIG representatives, Commanders of the Resistance Force and the BRA. Back in Bougainville, mini 'peace treaties' had already been signed between various groups to cease hostilities amongst themselves and consolidate the spirit of the *Burnham Declaration on Unity and Reconciliation*.

The leaders also agreed to meet on a regular basis to monitor the implementation of this commitment and to

invite a neutral regional Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) to monitor the terms of the truce.

The peace process continues

In November 1997 another round of preparatory talks, facilitated by the Australian government, was held in Cairns. Bougainvillean leaders and PNG Government representatives attended the meeting to prepare for a leaders' meeting in January 1998, as well as to review the progress and the implementation of the Burnham Truce. The *Cairns Commitment-on-Implementation of the Agreement* endorsed the BRA/BIG and BTG/Resistance participation in the deployment of the Truce Monitoring Group (TMG) to Bougainville.

In January 1998 the peace process returned to New Zealand where negotiations between the PNG government and Bougainville leaders culminated in the *Lincoln Agreement*. This formalised the agreements at Burnham II and established the process and schedule for achieving peace, security and development. Also agreed were the establishment of the Bougainville Reconciliation Government, disposal of arms and the consequent withdrawal of the PNGDF from Bougainville, the removal of bounties and the granting of amnesty and pardon to the BRA. This was followed by the *Ceasefire Agreement*, signed in Arawa on 30 April 1998.

Throughout this period, there had been regional meetings in Bougainville to allow the people to participate in the peace process. These were concluded in August 1998 with the Pan-Bougainville Leaders Congress held in Buin. Representatives from women's groups, local chiefs and elders were given the opportunity to present their respective views on Bougainville's political aspirations. They all read out statements declaring their political stance – complete independence from Papua New Guinea. In his concluding remarks, Kabui said, 'Now that we know our destination... we need to define and build the canoe in which we must set out on our journey to reach our desired destination.' The *Buin Declaration* was signed on 22 August 1998.

In December 1998, BTG/BIG leaders held consultative talks in Arawa and, in a *Joint Communiqué*, restated their commitment to the previous agreements and declarations. They jointly rejected the imposition of the provincial government reforms on Bougainville and agreed instead to adopt the constitution of the new Bougainville Reconciliation Government (finalised on 24 December) and to establish a Bougainville People's Congress by 31 December 1998.

Finally, the Bougainville leaders called on the Government of Papua New Guinea to agree to leaders' meeting to discuss details of the establishment of the congress and the political future of Bougainville.